



The Haunted Inheritance

BY E. NESBIT.

THE most extraordinary thing that ever happened to me was my going back to town on that day. I am a reasonable being; I do not do such things. I was on a bicycling tour with another man. We were far from the mean cares of an unremunerative profession; we were men unfettered by any given address, any pledged date, any preconcerted route. I went to bed weary and cheerful, fell asleep a mere animal—a tired dog after a day's hunting—and awoke at four in the morning that creature of nerves and fancies

which is my other self, and which has driven me to all the follies I have ever kept company with. But even that second self of mine, whining beast and traitor as it is, has never played me such a trick as it played then. Indeed, something in the result of that day's rash act sets me wondering whether after all it could have been I, or even my other self, who moved in the adventure; whether it was not rather some power outside both of us . . . but this is a speculation as idle in me as uninteresting to you, and so enough of it.

From four to seven I lay awake, the prey of a growing detestation of bicycling tours, friends, scenery, physical exertion, holidays. By seven o'clock I felt that I would rather perish than spend another day in the society of the other man—an excellent fellow, by the way, and the best of company.

At half-past seven the post came. I saw the postman through my window as I shaved. I went down to get my letters—there were none, naturally.

At breakfast I said: "Edmundson, my dear fellow, I am extremely sorry; but my letters this morning compel me to return to town at once."

"But I thought," said Edmundson—then he stopped, and I saw that he had perceived in time that this was no moment for reminding me of the fact that, having given no address, I could have had no letters.

He looked sympathetic, and gave me what there was left of the bacon. I suppose he thought that it was a love affair or some such folly. I let him think so; after all, no love affair but would have seemed wise compared with the blank idiocy of this sudden determination to cut short a delightful holiday and go back to those dusty, stuffy rooms in Gray's Inn.

After that first and almost pardonable lapse, Edmundson behaved beautifully. I caught the 9.17 train, and by half-past eleven I was climbing my dirty staircase.

I let myself in and waded through a heap of envelopes and wrapped circulars that had drifted in through the letter-box, as dead leaves drift into the areas of houses in squares.

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All the windows were shut. Dust lay thick on everything. My charwoman had evidently chosen this as a good time for her holiday. I wondered idly where she spent it. And now the close, musty smell of the rooms caught at my senses, and I remembered with a positive pang the sweet scent of the earth and the dead leaves in that wood through which, at this very moment, the sensible and fortunate Edmundson would be riding.

The thought of dead leaves reminded me of the heap of correspondence. I glanced through it. Only one of all those letters interested me in the least. It was from my mother:—

Elliot's Bay, Norfolk,
August 17th.

MY DEAR LAWRENCE,

I have great news for you. Your great-uncle Sefton has died, and left you half his immense property. The other half is left to your second cousin Selwyn. You must come home at once. There are heaps of letters here for you, but I dare not send them on, as goodness only knows where you may be. I do wish you would remember to leave an address. I send this to your rooms, in case you have had the forethought to instruct your charwoman to send your letters on to you. It is a most handsome fortune, and I am too happy about your accession to it to scold you as you deserve, but I hope this will be a lesson to you to leave an address when next you go away. Come home at once.

Your loving Mother,

MARGARET SEFTON.

P.S.—It is the maddest will: everything divided evenly between you two except the house and estate. The will says you and your cousin Selwyn are to meet there on the September 1st following his death, in presence of the family, and decide which of you is to have the house. If you can't agree, it's to be presented to the county for a lunatic asylum. I should think so! He was always so eccentric. The one who doesn't have the house, etc., gets £20,000. Of course you will choose *that*.

P.P.S.—Be sure to bring your under-shirts with you—the air here is very keen of an evening.

I opened both the windows and lit a pipe. Sefton Manor—that gorgeous old place. I knew its picture in Hasted—cradle of our race, and so on, and a big fortune. I hoped my cousin Selwyn would want the £20,000 more than he wanted the house. If he didn't—well, perhaps my fortune might be large enough to increase that £20,000 to a sum that he *would* want.

And then, suddenly, I became aware that this was the thirty-first of August, and that to-morrow was the day on which I was to meet my cousin Selwyn and "the family," and come to a decision about the house. I had never, to my knowledge, heard of my cousin Selwyn. We were a family rich in collateral branches. I hoped he would be a reasonable young man. Also, I had never seen Sefton Manor House, except in a print. It occurred to me that I would rather see the house before I saw the cousin.

I caught the next train to Sefton.

"It's but a mile by the field way," said the railway porter. "You take the stile—the first on the left—and follow the path till you come to the wood. Then skirt along the left of it, and walk across the meadow at the end, and you'll see the place right below you in the vale."

"It's a fine old place, I hear," said I.

"All to pieces though," said he. "I shouldn't wonder if it cost a couple o' hundred to put it to rights. Water coming through the roof and all."

"But surely the owner——"

"Oh, he never lived there; not since his son was taken. He lived in the lodge; it's on the brow of the hill looking down on the Manor House."

"Is the house empty?"

"As empty as a rotten nutshell, except for the old sticks o' furniture. Anyone who likes," added the porter, "can lie there o' nights. But it wouldn't be me!"

"Do you mean there's a ghost?" I hope I kept any note of undue elation out of my voice.

"I don't hold with ghosts," said the porter firmly, "but my aunt was in service at the lodge, and there's no doubt but *something* walks there."

"Come," I said, "this is very interesting. Can't you leave the station and come across to where beer is?"

"I don't mind if I do," said he. "That is so far as your standing a drop goes. But I can't leave the station, so if you pour my beer you must pour it dry, sir, as the saying is."

So I gave the man a shilling, and he told me about the ghost at Sefton Manor House.

Indeed, about the ghosts—for there were, it seemed, two—a lady in white, and a gentleman in a slouch hat and riding cloak.

"They do say," said my porter, "as how one of the young ladies once on a time was wishful to elope, and started so to do—not getting further than the hall door; her father, thinking it to be burglars, fired out of the window, and the happy pair fell on the doorstep, corpses."

"Is it true, do you think?"

The porter did not know. At any rate there was a tablet in the church to Maria Sefton and George Ballard—"and something about in their death them not being divided."

I took the stile, I skirted the wood, I walked across the meadows—and so I came out on a chalky ridge held in a net of pine roots, where dog violets grew. Below stretched the green park, dotted with trees. The lodge, stuccoed but solid, lay below me. Smoke came from its chimneys. Lower still lay the Manor House—red brick with grey lichen mullions—a house in a thousand—Elizabethan—and from its twisted beautiful chimneys no smoke arose. I hurried across the short turf towards the Manor House.

I had no difficulty in getting into the great garden. The bricks of the wall were everywhere displaced or crumbling. The ivy had forced the coping stones away; each red buttress offered a dozen spots for foothold. I climbed the wall and found myself in a garden—oh! but such a garden. There are not half a dozen such in England—clipped box hedges, rosaries, fountains, yew tree avenues, bowers of clematis (now feathery in its seedling time), great trees, grey-grown marble balustrades and steps, terraces, green lawns, one green lawn, in especial, girt round with a sweet briar hedge, and in the middle of this lawn a sundial. All this was mine, or, to be more exact, might be mine, should my cousin Selwyn prove to be a person of sense. How I prayed that he might not be a person of taste! That he might be a person who liked yachts or racehorses or diamonds, or anything that money can buy, not a person who liked beautiful Elizabethan houses, and gardens old beyond belief.

The sundial stood on a mass of masonry, too low and wide to be called a pillar. I

mounted the two brick steps and leaned over to read the date and the motto:

Tempus fugit manet amor.

One date was 1617, the initials S. S. surmounted it. The face of the dial was unusually ornate—a wreath of stiffly drawn roses was traced outside the circle of the numbers. As I leaned there a sudden movement on the other side of the pedestal compelled my attention. I leaned over a little further to see what had rustled—a rat—a rabbit? A flash of pink struck at my eyes. A lady in a pink dress was sitting on the step at the other side of the sundial.

I suppose some exclamation escaped me—the lady looked up. Her hair was dark, and her eyes; her face was pink and white, with a few little gold-coloured freckles on nose and on cheek bones. Her dress was of pink cotton stuff, thin and soft. She looked like a beautiful pink rose.

Our eyes met.

"I beg your pardon," said I, "I had no idea—" there I stopped and tried to crawl back to firm ground. Graceful explanations are not best given by one sprawling on his stomach across a sundial.

By the time I was once more on my feet she too was standing.

"It is a beautiful old place," she said gently, and, as it seemed, with a kindly wish to relieve my embarrassment. She made a movement as if to turn away.

"Quite a show place," said I, stupidly enough, but I was still a little embarrassed, and I wanted to say something—anything—to arrest her departure. You have no idea how pretty she was. She had a straw hat in her hand, dangling by soft black ribbons. Her hair was all fluffy-soft—like a child's.

"I suppose you have seen the house?" I asked.

She paused, one foot still on the lower step of the sundial, and her face seemed to brighten at the touch of some idea as sudden as welcome.

"Well—no," she said. "The fact is—I wanted frightfully to see the house; in fact, I've come miles and miles on purpose, but there's no one to let me in."

"The people at the lodge?" I suggested.

"Oh, no," she said. "I—— the fact is I—— I don't want to be shown round. I want to explore!" She looked at me critically. Her eyes dwelt on my right hand, which lay on the sundial. I have always taken reasonable care of my hands, and I wore a good ring, a sapphire, cut with the Sefton arms: an heirloom, by the way. Her glance at my hand preluded a longer glance at my face. Then she shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"Oh, well," she said, and it was as if she had said plainly, "I see that you are a gentleman and a decent fellow. Why should I not look over the house in your company? Introductions? Bah!"

All this her shrug said without ambiguity as without words.

"Perhaps," I hazarded, "I could get the keys."

"Do you really care very much for old houses?"

"I do," said I, "and you?"

"I care so much that I nearly broke into this one. I should have done it quite if the windows had been an inch or two lower."

"I am an inch or two higher," said I—standing squarely so as to make the most of my six-feet beside her five-feet-eight or thereabouts.

"Oh—if you only would." said she.

"Why not?" said I.

She led the way past the marble basin of the fountain, and, along the historic yew avenue, planted, like all old yew avenues, by that industrious gardener our Eighth Henry. Then across a lawn, through a winding, grassy, shrubbery path, that ended at a green door in the garden wall.

"You can lift this latch with a hairpin," said she, and therewith lifted it.

We walked into a courtyard. Young grass

grew green between the grey flags on which our steps echoed.

"This is the window," said she. "You see there's a pane broken. If you could get on to the window-sill, you could get your hand in and undo the hasp, and—"

"And you?"

"Oh, you'll let me in by the kitchen door."

I did it. My conscience called me a burglar—in vain. Was it not my own, or as good as my own house?

I let her in at the back door. We walked through the great dark kitchen where the old



We walked through the great dark kitchen.

three-legged pot towered large on the hearth, and the old spits and firedogs still kept their ancient place. Then through another kitchen where red rust was making its full meal of a comparatively modern range.

Then into the great hall, where the old armour and the buff-coats and round-caps hang on the walls, and where the carved stone staircases run at each side up to the gallery above.

The long tables that ran down the hall were scored by the knives of the many who

had eaten meat there—initials and dates were cut into them. The roof was groined, the windows low arched.

"Oh, but what a place!" said she, "this must be much older than the rest of it—"

"Evidently. About 1300 I should say."

"Oh, let us explore the rest," she cried; "it is really a comfort not to have a guide, but only a person like you who just guesses comfortably at dates. I should hate to be told *exactly* when this hall was built."

We explored ball-room and picture gallery, white parlour and library. Most of the rooms were furnished—all heavily, some magnificently—but everything was dusty and faded.

It was in the white parlour, a spacious panelled room on the first floor, that she told me the ghost story, substantially the same as my porter's tale, only in one respect different.

"And so, just as she was leaving this very room—yes, I'm sure it's this room, because the woman at the inn pointed out this double window and told me so—just as the poor lovers were creeping out of the door, the cruel father came quickly out of some dark place and killed them both. So now they haunt it."

"It is a terrible thought," said I gravely. "How would you like to live in a haunted house?"

"I couldn't," she said quickly.

"Nor I; it would be too—" my speech would have ended flippantly, but for the grave set of her features.

"I wonder who *will* live here," she said. "The owner is just dead. They say it is an awful house, full of ghosts. Of course one is not afraid now"—the sunlight lay golden and soft on the dusty parquet of the floor—"but at night, when the wind wails, and the doors creak, and the things rustle, oh, it must be awful!"

"I hear the house has been left to two people, or rather one is to have the house, and the other a sum of money," said I. "It's a beautiful house, full of beautiful things, but I should think at least one of the heirs would rather have the money."

"Oh, yes, I should think so certainly. I wonder whether the heirs know about the ghost? The lights can be seen from the

inn, you know, at twelve o'clock, and they see the ghost in white at the window."

"Never the black one?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so."

"The ghosts don't appear together?"

"No."

"I suppose," said I, "whoever it is that manages such things knows that the poor ghosts would like to be together, so it won't let them."

She shivered.

"Come," she said, "we have seen all over the house; let us get back into the sunshine. Now I will go out, and you shall bolt the door after me, and then you can come out by the window. Thank you so much for all the trouble you have taken. It has really been quite an adventure."

I rather liked that expression, and she hastened to spoil it.

"Quite an adventure going all over this glorious old place, and looking at everything one wanted to see, and not just at what the housekeeper didn't mind your looking at."

She passed through the door, but when I had closed it and prepared to lock it, I found that the key was no longer in the lock. I looked on the floor—I felt in my pockets, and at last, wandering back into the kitchen, discovered it on the table, where I swear I never put it.

When I had fitted that key into the lock and turned it, and got out of the window and made that fast, I dropped into the yard. No one shared its solitude with me. I searched garden and pleasure grounds, but never a glimpse of pink rewarded my anxious eyes. I found the sundial again, and stretched myself along the warm brick of the wide step where she had sat: and called myself a fool.

I had let her go. I did not know her name; I did not know where she lived; she had been at the inn, but probably only for lunch. I should never see her again, and certainly in that event I should never see again such dark, soft eyes, such hair, such a contour of cheek and chin, such a frank smile—in a word, a girl with whom it would be so delightfully natural for me to fall in love. For all the time she had been talking to me of architecture and archaeology, of dates

and periods, of carvings and mouldings, I had been recklessly falling in love with the idea of falling in love with her. I had cherished and adored this delightful possibility, and now my chance was over. Even I could not definitely fall in love after one interview with a girl I was never to see again! And falling in love is so pleasant! I cursed my lost chance, and went back to the inn. I talked to the waiter.

"Yes, a lady in pink had lunched there with a party. Had gone on to the Castle. A party from Tonbridge it was."

Barnhurst Castle is close to Sefton Manor. The inn lays itself out to entertain persons who come in braces and carve their names on the walls of the Castle keep. The inn has a visitors' book. I examined it. Some twenty feminine names. Anyone might be hers. The waiter looked over my shoulder. I turned the pages.

"Only parties staying in the house in this part of the book," said the waiter.

My eye caught one name. "Selwyn Sefton" in a clear, round, black handwriting.

"Staying here?" I pointed to the name.

"Yes, sir: came to-day, sir."

"Can I have a private sitting-room?"

I had one. I ordered my dinner to be served in it, and I sat down and considered my course of action. Should I invite my cousin Selwyn to dinner, ply him with wine, and exact promises? Honour forbade. Should I seek him out and try to establish friendly relations? To what end?

Then I saw from my window a young man in a light-checked suit, with a face at once pallid and coarse. He strolled along the gravel path, and a woman's voice in the garden called "Selwyn."

He disappeared in the direction of the voice. I don't think I ever disliked a man so much at first sight.

"Brute," said I, "why should he have the house? He'd stucco it all over as likely as not; perhaps let it! He'd never stand the ghosts, either—"

Then the inexcusable, daring idea of my life came to me, striking me rigid—a blow from my other self. It must have been a minute or two before my muscles relaxed and my arms fell at my sides.

"I'll do it," I said.

I dined. I told the people of the house not to sit up for me. I was going to see friends in the neighbourhood, and might stay the night with them. I took my Inverness cape with me on my arm and my soft felt hat in my pocket. I wore a light suit and a straw hat.

Before I started, I leaned cautiously from my window. The lamp at the bow window next to mine showed me the pallid young man, smoking a fat, reeking cigar. I hoped he would continue to sit there smoking. His window looked the right way. And if he didn't see what I wanted him to see, someone else in the inn would. The landlady had assured me that I should disturb no one if I came in at half-past twelve.

"We hardly keep country hours here, sir," she said, "on account of so much excursionist business."

I bought candles in the village, and, as I went down across the park in the soft darkness, I turned again and again to be sure that the light and the pallid young man were still at that window. It was now past eleven.

I got into the house and lighted a candle, and crept through the dark kitchens, whose windows, I knew, did not look towards the inn. When I came to the hall I blew out my candle. I dared not show light prematurely, and in the unhaunted part of the house.

I gave myself a nasty knock against one of the long tables, but it helped me to get my bearings, and presently I laid my hand on the stone balustrade of the great staircase. You would hardly believe me if I were to tell you truly of my sensations as I began to go up these stairs. I am not a coward—at least, I had never thought so till then—but the absolute darkness unnerved me. I had to go slowly or I should have lost my head and blundered up the stairs three at a time, so strong was the feeling of something—something uncanny—just behind me.

I set my teeth. I reached the top of the stairs, felt along the walls, and after a false start, which landed me in the great picture gallery, I found the white parlour, entered it, closed the door, and felt my way to a little room without a window, which we had decided must have been a powdering room.

Here I ventured to re-light my candle. The white parlour, I remembered, was fully furnished. Returning to it I struck one match, and by its flash determined the way to the mantelpiece.

Then the powdering-room door closed behind me. I felt my way to the mantelpiece and took down the two brass twenty-lighted candelabra. I placed these on a table a yard or two from the window, and in them set up my candles. It is astonishingly difficult in the dark to do anything, even a thing so simple as the setting up of a candle.

Then I went back into my little room, put on the Inverness cape and the slouch hat, and looked at my watch. Eleven-thirty. I must wait. I sat down and waited. I thought how rich I was — the thought fell flat; I wanted this house. I thought of my beautiful pink lady; but I put that thought aside; I had an inward consciousness that my conduct, more heroic than enough in one sense, would seem mean and crafty in her eyes. Only ten minutes had passed. I could not wait till twelve. The chill of the night and of the damp, unused house, and, perhaps, some less material influence, made me shiver.

I opened the door, crept on hands and knees to the table, and, carefully keeping myself below the level of the window, I

reached up a trembling arm, and lighted, one by one, my forty candles. The room was a blaze of light. My courage came back to me with the retreat of the darkness. I was far too excited to know what a fool I was making of myself. I rose boldly, and struck an attitude over against the window, where the candle light shone upon as well as behind me. My Inverness was flung jauntily over my shoulder, my soft, black felt twisted and slouched over my eyes.

There I stood for the world, and particularly for my cousin Selwyn, to see, the very image of the ghost that haunted that chamber. And from my window I could see the light in that other window, and indistinctly the lounging figure there. Oh, my cousin Selwyn, I wished many things to your address in that moment! For it was only a moment that I had to feel brave and daring in.

Then I heard, deep down in the house, a sound, very

slight, very faint. Then came silence. I drew a deep breath. The silence endured. And I stood by my lighted window.

After a very long time, as it seemed, I heard a board crack, and then a soft rustling sound that drew near and seemed to pause outside the very door of my parlour.

Again I held my breath, and now I thought of the most horrible story Poe ever wrote —



I lighted, one by one, my forty candles.

"The Fall of the House of Usher"—and I fancied I saw the handle of that door move. I fixed my eyes on it. The fancy passed : and returned.

Then again there was silence. And then the door opened with a soft, silent suddenness, and I saw in the doorway a figure in trailing white. Its eyes blazed in a death-white face. It made two ghostly, gliding steps forward, and my heart stood still. I had not thought it possible for a man to experience so sharp a pang of sheer terror. I had masqueraded as one of the ghosts in this accursed house. Well, the other ghost—the real one—had come to meet me. I do not like to dwell on that moment. The only thing which it pleases me to remember is that I did not scream or go mad. I think I stood on the verge of both.

The ghost, I say, took two steps forward ; then it threw up its arms, the lighted taper it carried fell on the floor, and it reeled back against the door with its arms across its face.

The fall of the candle woke me as from a nightmare. It fell solidly, and rolled away under the table.

I perceived that my ghost was human. I cried incoherently : "Don't, for Heaven's sake—it's all right."

The ghost dropped its hands and turned agonised eyes on me. I tore off my cloak and hat.

"I—didn't—scream," she said, and with that I sprang forward and caught her in my arms—my poor, pink lady—white now as a white rose.

I carried her into the powdering-room, and left one candle with her, extinguishing the others hastily, for now I saw what in my extravagant folly had escaped me before, that my ghost exhibition might bring the whole village down on the house. I tore down the long corridor and double locked the doors leading from it to the staircase, then back to the powdering-room and the prone white rose. How, in the madness of that night's folly, I had thought to bring a brandy-flask passes



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my understanding. But I had done it. Now I rubbed her hands with the spirit. I rubbed her temples, I tried to force it between her lips, and at last she sighed and opened her eyes.

"Oh—thank God—thank God," I cried, for indeed I had almost feared that my mad trick had killed her. "Are you better? oh, poor little lady, are you better?"

She moved her head a little on my arm.

Again she sighed, and her eyes closed. I gave her more brandy. She took it, choked, raised herself against my shoulder.

"I'm all right now," she said faintly. "It served me right. How silly it all is!" Then she began to laugh, and then she began to cry.

It was at this moment that we heard voices on the terrace below. She clutched at my arm in a frenzy of terror, the bright tears glistening on her cheeks.

"Oh! not any more, not any more," she cried. "I can't bear it."

"Hush," I said, taking her hands strongly in mine. "I've played the fool; so have you. We must play the man now. The people in the village have seen the lights—that's all. They think we're burglars. They can't get in. Keep quiet, and they'll go away."

But when they did go away they left the local constable on guard. He kept guard like a man till daylight began to creep over the hill, and then he crawled into the hayloft and fell asleep, small blame to him.

But through those long hours I sat beside her and held her hand. At first she clung to me as a frightened child clings, and her tears were the prettiest, saddest things to see. As we grew calmer we talked.

"I did it to frighten my cousin," I owned, "I meant to have told you to-day, I mean yesterday, only you went away. I am Lawrence Sefton, and the place is to go either to me or to my cousin Selwyn. And I wanted to frighten him off it. But you, why did you—?"

Even then I couldn't see. She looked at me.

"I don't know how I ever could have thought I was brave enough to do it, but I did want the house so, and I wanted to frighten you—"

"To frighten *me*. Why?"

"Because I am your cousin Selwyn," she said, hiding her face in her hands.

"And you knew me?" I asked.

"By your ring," she said. "I saw your father wear it when I was a little girl. Can't we get back to the inn now?"

"Not unless you want everyone to know how silly we have been."

"I wish you'd forgive me," she said when we had talked awhile, and she had even laughed at the description of the pallid young man on whom I had bestowed, in my mind, her name.

"The wrong is mutual," I said, "we will exchange forgivenesses."

"Oh, but it isn't," she said eagerly. "Because I knew it was you, and you didn't know it was me: you wouldn't have tried to frighten *me*."

"You know I wouldn't." My voice was tenderer than I meant it to be.

She was silent.

"And who is to have the house?" she said.

"Why you, of course."

"I never will."

"Why?"

"Oh, because!"

"Can't we put off the decision?" I asked.

"Impossible. We must decide to-morrow—to-day I mean."

"Well, when we meet to-morrow—I mean to-day—with lawyers and chaperones and mothers and relations, give me one word alone with you."

"Yes," she answered, with docility.

"Do you know," she said presently, "I can never respect myself again? To undertake a thing like that, and then be so horribly frightened. Oh! I thought you really *were* the other ghost."

"I will tell you a secret," said I. "I thought *you* were, and I was much more frightened than you."

"Oh, well," she said, leaning against my shoulder as a tired child might have done, "if you were frightened too, Cousin Lawrence, I don't mind so very, very much."

It was soon afterwards that, cautiously looking out of the parlour window for the twentieth time, I had the happiness of seeing the local policeman disappear into the stable rubbing his eyes.

We got out of the window on the other side of the house, and went back to the inn across the dewy park. The French window of the sitting-room which had let her out let us both in. No one was stirring, so no one save she and I were any the wiser as to that night's work.

* * * * *

It was like a garden party next day, when lawyers and executors and aunts and relations met on the entrance in front of Sefton Manor House.

Her eyes were downcast. She followed her aunt demurely over the house and the grounds.

"Your decision," said my great uncle's solicitor, "has to be given within the hour."

"My cousin and I will announce it within that time," I said, and I at once gave her my arm.

Arrived at the sundial we stopped.

"This is my proposal," I said, "we will say that we decide that the house is yours — we will spend the £20,000 in restoring it and the grounds. By the time that's done we can decide who is to have it."

"But how?"

"Oh, we'll draw lots, or toss a halfpenny, or anything you like."

"I'd rather decide now," she said, "you take it."

"No, you shall."

"I'd rather you had it. I — I don't feel so greedy as I did yesterday," she said.

"Neither do I. Or at any rate not in the same way."

"Do — do take the house," she said very earnestly.

Then I said: "My cousin Selwyn, unless you take the house, I shall make you an offer of marriage."

"Oh!" she breathed.

"And when you have declined it, on the very proper ground of our too slight

acquaintance, I will take my turn at declining. I will decline the house. Then if you are obdurate, it will become an asylum. Don't be obdurate. Pretend to take the house and —"

She looked at me rather piteously.

"Very well," she said, "I will pretend to take the house, and when it is restored —"

"We'll spin the penny."

So before the waiting relations the house was adjudged to my cousin Selwyn. When the restoration was complete I met Selwyn at the sundial. We had met there often, in the course of the restoration, in which business we both took an extravagant interest.

"Now," I said, "we'll spin the penny. Heads you take the house, tails it comes to me."

I spun the coin — it fell on the brick steps of the sundial, and stuck upright there, wedged between two bricks. She laughed. I laughed.

"It's not my house," I said.

"It's not my house," said she. "Dear," said I, and we were neither of us laughing then, "can't it be *our* house?"

And, thank goodness, our house it is.



The coin stuck upright there, wedged between two bricks.